ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE 21a
WALL STREET JOURNAL
10 November 1986

# Reagan's Fondness for Covert Action Threatens His Activist Foreign Policy

**WASHINGTON INSIGHT**

By JOHN WALCOTT
*Staff Reporter of* THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WASHINGTON—The Reagan administration's penchant for substituting covert action for foreign policy is threatening to revive the partisan squabbling that crippled U.S. policy and paralyzed the Central Intelligence Agency and the Pentagon a decade ago.

The Democratic leaders of the new Senate have promised to begin digging deep for the secrets of the administration's policies toward Iran, Libya and Nicaragua. The press already thinks it smells Watergate-style abuses of presidential power, while congressional investigations, coming as a wide-open battle for the presidency begins, could unravel the fragile consensus that has favored the activist foreign policy Ronald Reagan struggled so hard to create.

If that happens, however, the president will have mostly himself to blame. Time and again, he has turned to covert action to carry out policies that Congress wouldn't support, as in Nicaragua, or which his own advisers couldn't agree on, as in Libya and Iran.

## Unnerved Professionals

This fondness for clandestine activities, encouraged by CIA Director William Casey and by the president's national security advisers, has unnerved both Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and Secretary of State George Shultz and rattled many of the professionals in the CIA and the military. All of them remember that one lesson of the Nixon years is not to get involved in policies the public doesn't support.

It is Mr. Reagan's self-assurance and his visionary nature, the very qualities that have made him an effective leader, that have gotten him into trouble. He isn't one to quit doing what he thinks is right simply because Congress, or his cabinet, won't support it.

In Central America, for example, Congress's refusal to provide aid to the anti-Sandinista rebels in Nicaragua prompted Mr. Reagan, this time with broad support from his advisers, to use members of the National Security Council staff, shielded from prying congressmen by the claim of executive privilege, to carry on the secret war against the Sandinistas.

## Divisions on Gadhafi

In Libya, the administration's problem has been different. From Mr. Reagan's first days in office, his advisers have been divided on how seriously to take Col. Moammar Gadhafi and especially on whether to use force against him.

After receiving multiple intelligence reports that suggested Mr. Gadhafi was thinking about assassinating the president or top U.S. officials, the administration late in 1981 turned to covert action as a lowest-common-denominator attempt to put pressure on Libya.

In Iran, officials say, Mr. Reagan's motives were largely humanitarian, but the result was even more controversial. When Messrs. Shultz and Weinberger expressed reservations about trying to trade arms for hostages, the president and National Security Advisers Robert McFarlane and John Poindexter simply bypassed them and Congress.

If Mr. Reagan's instincts provided the motives, the presence on the NSC staff of a veteran covert operator, Marine Lt. Col. Oliver North, provided a unique opportunity to run operations out of the Old Executive Office Building. Col. North is a gung-ho veteran of covert operations in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, and much of the congressional and press interest in the administration's clandestine activities currently focuses on him.

Some fellow officers disparagingly call him "the highest-ranking lieutenant colonel in the world," and his colleagues on the White House staff have made a religion of not knowing where he is or what he's doing.

What Col. North has been doing is following orders, sometimes at considerable risk to himself. He keeps a cardboard box full of bulletproof garments in his cramped office and his wife and children frequently have no idea where he is or when he might return. If he is guilty of something, it's of carrying out his orders too enthusiastically, not of making them up himself. "Ollie isn't very good at humility, but he's a legman, not a policy maker," says one high-ranking White House official.

The failure of the administration's covert-action policies is not in their stars, but in themselves.

First, it is a bitter fact of life that most covert policies can't stay covert for long. The administration's efforts to free the hostages may have set some kind of record by remaining hidden for 18 months.

Second, running clandestine activities out of the White House may keep things hidden awhile, but in the end it guarantees them a higher public and political profile than they would acquire at CIA headquarters.

Third, covert actions which short-circuit the normal foreign policy process often don't get the thought they deserve. Keeping policies secret often is an attempt to avoid unpleasant consequences, for example European and Arab resentment at providing arms to Iran.

Last, covert action is no substitute for popular support, or for a consensus within the administration. If the president and his advisers were gambling that once their policies were set in motion the Doubting Thomases in Congress and the bureaucracy would rally behind them, they've lost.

The damage could be enormous. By making U.S. policy once again a partisan issue, the president may have undone the one thing he wanted most to do: to restore America's ability to act decisively on the world stage.

STAT